

Introducing Ourselves Through Poetry

The Limerick

ED 4352 – Poetry K-12 – Sexsmith

Otherwise known as poetry for the common man, limericks, named after the Irish town of the same name, were first published in 1820 in *The History of Sixteen Wonderful Old Women Exhibiting their Principle Eccentricities and Amusements* by James Harris. They were popularised by Edward Lear (1812 - 1888) in his 1846 *Book of Nonsense*, a two-volume work featuring 73 illustrated limericks. These books were intended for children, with mildly nonsensical verses such as these:

*There was an old man of the coast
Who placidly sat on a post
But when it was cold
He relinquished his hold
And called for some hot, buttered toast.*

Characteristic of Lear's limericks is the identical ending to the first and last lines (example 1) and the use of a place-name at the end of each. Given the intended audience, most of the limericks in his book closely resemble those reproduced above, seldom using a different word for the last line and seldom introducing the humorous twist until the third line.

Limerick Structure

Limericks are officially described as a form of 'anapestic trimeter'; the 'anapest' is a 'foot' of poetic verse consisting of three syllables, the third longer (or accentuated to a greater degree) than the first two. Lines one, two and five of a limerick should ideally consist of three anapests each, concluding with an identical or similar phoneme to create the rhyme. Lines three and four are shorter, constructed of two anapests each and again rhyming with each other. Thus, the overall rhyme structure of a, a, b, b, a, with the beat pattern

a:da-da-daah da-da-daah da-da-daah
b:da-da-daah da-da-daah

Limerick Content

While the appreciation of a finely-structured limerick has a place in today's world, tradition dictates that the comic value of a limerick is greatly enhanced if the content involves that great stalwart of humorous verse - vulgarity. As teachers this is the only issue you do need to watch out for. Get this out in the open. You can smile about it – but make sure you make it clear that if you can't read this to your mother don't even think about reading it to the class ☺. Since Lear's time, the habit of using the same word (usually a place) to end the first and final lines has been supplanted. Limericks today often comprise the following basic formula:

A maiden, whose name was
Felicity

Tried living without electricity:

By propane she cooks

And by oil-lamp reads books

And forbids watching telly explicitly.

In groups of 3 interview one another. Find out some of the characteristics of each person in your group. What hobbies do they have? Where do they come from? As a team, link what you learn into the structure of a limerick! On the chart paper provided you will write out the Introductory Limericks for each member of your group. We'll share these together as a class – learning a little bit more about poetry and a whole lot more about each other.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no text or other markings on the paper.